

## Lessons Learned from the Missouri Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP)

The Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP) members reported that while they found being involved in the self-assessment process to be very rewarding overall, they also found it very painful. As the members were in the process of plowing through the bewildering process, they were especially dismayed by the two reductions of indicators by the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). For future work, the Panel members requested more explicit guidance from OSEP in a number of areas. One such area was the definition of a “qualified” teacher.

The Panel members have a new appreciation of the use of data to determine the various aspects of the status of special education in Missouri. One of the big lessons is the importance of data collection. While the members were very pleased with some of the data that was available, they are now aware of the need to collect additional data. They want to work with the Missouri Department of Education, Special Education Division (DESE) to find better ways to collect student information. They were pleased with the information from the student focus groups, and they are eager to have continuing student input during the improvement process.

Panel members gained a new respect for DESE staff members. They noted that these staff members were forthcoming and open with all data and information during the self-assessment process. When the sub-committee members requested additional information, DESE staff members were very proactive and made every effort to provide the requested information as well as reasonable explanations when the information could not be secured. While panel members would prefer that the differences in progress between students with disabilities could be compared to students without disabilities, they understand that the Missouri data system is not currently set up for that comparison in all areas. They plan to concentrate on working on improvement plans to narrow the difference in outcomes between students with disabilities and all students. Panel members were also pleased to discover that a number of areas have improvements in process – such as the activities in the Missouri State Improvement Grant (SIG).

Some members noted that there were too many members on the Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP) to act as an efficient Steering Committee while others felt that the use of the entire panel was efficient. Even when the work was allocated to cluster committees, the SEAP members wanted final approval on the overview answers developed by all the cluster committees. This often proved challenging when some SEAP members had not been involved in the cluster committees and were not always in attendance at all the SEAP meetings. Evident through the spring and fall of 2001, many panel members were confused as to the process, which was complicated by the frequent changes imposed by OSEP. Therefore, Panel members recommend that the improvement process be highly structured with a clear definition of methodology mapped out in advance. Panel members are eager to work on the improvement process and they believe that the improvement planning and implementation is what will really make a difference for students with disabilities in Missouri.

## Lessons Learned from the Missouri State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC)

The Missouri State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC) members who worked on the Early Childhood clusters for the Missouri Self-Assessment reported that the process resulted in a heightened appreciation of the value of data both for monitoring purposes and to use for ongoing decisions. However, they noted that the timing of having members work on the self-assessment was especially difficult in relation to the time it consumed as they were engulfed in all the aspects of implementation of Phase I of the new First Steps system. Nonetheless, the members stated that the final Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) list of indicators supported the fact that there had been a need for the comprehensive redesign of the First Steps system and they were pleased that it was in place.

The members also noted that participating in the self-assessment process had the effect of once again emphasizing that Part C is complex to monitor. While comprehensive data is helpful, it does not always answer all of the questions. Members involved realize more than ever that it takes a period of time to have useful data. They appreciated the flexibility of being able to use both old and new data for the self-assessment at this point.

While the SICC members acknowledge that working on the self-assessment has been a learning experience, there were also frustrations. The members believe that they did not have a good initial understanding of the comprehensiveness of the process. While they were given an overview presentation when they first began the work, the members reported that their understanding of the long-term aspects of the process was not clear. Some members believe it might have helped if a few SICC members had been able to attend the OSEP Chicago Summer Institute when the process had initially been rolled out. The members also noted that they were confused by the changes (two reductions) in indicators from OSEP during the period of time they were working on the self-assessment. Now that the self-assessment is completed, they look forward to how data will inform the next steps of the process.